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Land and Discover! A Case Study Investigating the Cultural Context of Plagiarism

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Abstract

Despite a growing body of evidence, the common causal factors of plagiarism among international students are still widely seen to be poor language skills or a lack of academic integrity on the part of the students. This research uses the experiences of a particular cohort of students to explore these assumptions. It investigates and compares the notion of academic integrity and the understanding of plagiarism of both Indian postgraduate students who are currently studying in Australia and students currently studying at Indian universities. Postgraduate international students from India have studied in English at an undergraduate level in India and have a clear understanding of academic integrity in their own context. However their undergraduate experience occurs in a culturally different context to that of the Australian university system and they face the challenge of learning new academic conventions. This paper argues that students coming from different educational cultures require proper and explicit induction into the principles and philosophy behind many western academic conventions as different conventions of scholarship in the Australian education system can create unique difficulties for them. To accuse international students in general of a lack of integrity because they plagiarise or to blame only their lack of language skills for plagiarising seems to be arguable. Rather, the impact of transition from a different university culture without explicit academic skills orientation and instruction needs to be addressed. The paper also points towards the paradox of punishment in western universities where international students have to prove their integrity and innocence regarding the ethical principles of a new and foreign culture.

Introduction

Internationalisation of Higher Education has tended to mean the westernisation of this sector, as it has been more of a one way flow of especially Non English Speaking Background (NESB) Asian students to universities providing western academic degrees either at their onshore or offshore campuses. The discourse of Higher Education therefore is rife with themes of internationalisation of academic institutes and accompanying discussions regarding teaching and learning issues. In those discussions that focus on the issue of plagiarism, there tends to be some stigma attached to international students and their role in this issue. Often these students are portrayed as being rote-learners who are “persistent plagiarisers” (Parks 2003, p. 480), usually either because they lack language skills or lack integrity. As a means of investigating these assumptions, the researchers chose to conduct a case study into International students from India where, although English is not the first language of the vast majority of Indians, it is the language of Higher Education. It was hypothesised that Indian students studying at a postgraduate level in Australia, having studied in English at an undergraduate level would not encounter particular difficulties with their study due to language issues and if they did encounter difficulties and plagiarised it would be because of their prior experience of a different academic culture in their country. To investigate the issues of these students’ understanding of plagiarism and the related concept of academic integrity, questionnaires were sent to students studying in India and to lecturers teaching in an Indian institution and interviews were conducted with students studying at postgraduate level in Australia.

Drawing on the results of our research and utilising Leask’s (in press) metaphor of the rules of the game that need to be learnt before participation occurs, we will suggest that Indian postgraduate students do not know the rules of Australian academic writing on arrival and need to be comprehensively and explicitly acculturated into academic writing conventions. It seems that most educational institutes, other than having many international students on their campuses, have not yet become international institutes and many academics teaching their ‘international’ classes have not adapted or changed their teaching practices (Liddicoat 2004; Paige 2004); and it is the international students who are being expected to undergo a transformation. However the paradoxical situation that many of these students encounter has not yet been fully articulated in the literature. These students are participants in a ‘game’ in which they have not yet learnt the rules and the game is also substantially different from the one they have played in their home country. Therefore we would argue that rather than shifting blame to the players who have not yet learnt the rules, Australian institutions are responsible for initiating and inducting their students, both local and international to enable successful participation.

Literature Review

In the climate of internationalisation of Higher Education, where many western countries are vying for full fee paying international students, the Higher Education sector in Australia has also entered the competitive market with vigour. As a result, 24.2% of the current student population in Australian universities is international (DEST, 2005) bringing in a crucial 15% of university revenue (DEST 2005). With more than three quarters of these students coming from Asia (Nelson 2003), and accruing significant financial benefit to Australia, the value placed on their academic experience is immense and justified.

Besides the monetary contributions international students make to the financially struggling education sector, they are also deemed important as cultural contributors to Australian higher education (Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir 2005) and along with other international students are viewed as a means of connecting Australia with the rest of the world (AVCC 2002). Substantial literature has been devoted to their adjustment issues in the western academic environment (Phillips 1990; Tootell 1999; Ramburuth & McCormick 2001; Volet 2003; Leask 2004; Deumert et al. 2005) and recently many reports about the quality assurance of the institutional practices regarding international students have been commissioned (Leask 2003; Wood 2004; University of Melbourne 2004).

The themes to emerge from this discourse relate to the academic adjustment difficulties of NESB international students because of their poor English language and different cultural learning styles and the difficulties academics and western institutes face in accommodating these factors. However a need for universities to take responsibility for providing quality education to all students sincerely and to improve their practices to match their mission statements has also emerged (Back, Davis & Olsen 1996, cited in Tootell 1999; Volet 2003; UNISA 2004).

NESB International Students

It has been agreed that international students, especially those from a non-English speaking background studying in western universities, often enter a difficult and complex situation whereby cultural differences and language competencies are often exacerbated (Gardner 1985; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Ellis 1995; Canagarajah 2002). The medium of study encountered in an Australian university is not only a second language for international students, but its academic version which can be a difficult feat to overcome even for many local students (Krause 2001; Biggs 2003). However in western universities it is perceived that problems with teaching and learning usually relate to students from non Anglo-Celtic backgrounds (Biggs 2003). To some extent this is the case as their limited language skills and prior experience of a different education culture (Biggs 2003) create challenges in mastering Western academic conventions. Poor writing leading to plagiphrasing and unintentional plagiarism (Ryan 2000; Handa 2004) are therefore some of the study related problems that NESB international students seem most to struggle with (Carroll 2002). Therefore their need for ample time to adjust and develop their skills in academic writing and critical thinking and their need for support and guidance during their transition have been advocated (Burns 1991; Leask 1999; Ryan 2000; McInnis 2001; Schevyns, Wild & Overton 2003; Chanock 2003; Handa 2003; Carroll 2004a).

Plagiarism in General

In the western academic context plagiarism is generally understood to mean borrowing the words and ideas of others and using them in one's writing or other work without acknowledging the original source. In this context it is essentially considered an academic crime to use unattributed material in assignments and universities concerned about the educational integrity of their institutes have policies and academic integrity committees to curb "cheating", and the use of electronic detection software to check students' use of unacknowledged sources has become a norm in many faculties. Nevertheless plagiarism remains a serious issue in the western world.

In an Australian study conducted in 2001 more than 80 per cent of university students admitted to plagiarising their work at some time, and by using a software to detect plagiarism academics in an Australian university found large amounts of “unattributed web-based material” in their students’ writing (Caval Collaborative Solutions 2002). US students admitting to cutting and pasting from the Internet without acknowledgement had more than tripled in 2003 (McCabe 2003) with similar trends in the UK where it was recognised that the “acknowledged levels of academic misconduct” in universities were “only the tip of the iceberg” (Carroll & Appleton 2001 p.6). Hence the numbers of students committing plagiarism is and has been on the rise (Carroll 2004b); and especially with the advent of internet it has become “more common and more widespread” (Parks 2003 p. 471).

It is claimed that students commit plagiarism due to time pressures or carelessness or to achieve easy marks (Bannister & Ashworth 1998; Harris 2001; JISC 2002; Carroll 2005). However there is concurrence in the literature that plagiarism is not a simple issue (Hallett, Woodley & Dixon 2003; Hamilton, Hinton & Hawkins 2003) and many students actually commit plagiarism because of their confusion about it (Macdonald 2003) and due to lack of skills regarding borrowing and incorporating others’ ideas and words into their work (Whitaker 1993). Many academics, when they find incidents of such wrongdoing bemoan their students’ lack of integrity or blame their poor writing skills. Faced with their students’ plagiphrasing (Biggs 2003; Wilson 2003) sometimes they do not know where to draw the line because plagiarism is ambiguous (Leask, 2004). It is highly dependant on context (Carroll 2003) and academics equally confused and in disagreement about the degrees of intentional plagiarism and unintentional plagiarism or the definition of plagiarism (Biggs 2003) create separate rules for their own contexts (Carroll 2004b) adding to the perplexity of plagiarism.

Plagiarism and International Students

The particular issue regarding plagiarism and international students (Chanock 2003; Hamilton et al. 2003; Leask 2004; Carroll 2005) is equally complex and requires thorough investigation and study. When international students are accused of plagiarising it is often either because it is assumed that these students have poor language skills or that they lack integrity. These assumptions stem from a stereotypical view of NESB students in western universities (Introna, Hayes, Blair & Wood 2003, cited in Leask in press) when a deficit model of international students is taken (Chalmers & Volet 1997). It tends to be assumed that due to their poor language skills NESB students are usually not very confident in their own writing ability therefore they borrow words and ideas from others, using poor paraphrasing techniques or cut and paste chunks of texts (Bull, Coughlan, Collins & Sharpe 2001; Warner 1999). The stereotypical image of Asian students as substandard writers and persistent plagiarists (Deckert et al. 1993; Parks 2003) then feeds into the heightened debate about academic integrity and plagiarism. Despite research challenging perceptions of these students as rote learners or ‘cheats’ (Pennycook 1996; Ramburuth 2000; Parks 2003) many NESB international students are stigmatised as problematic and can be held responsible for lowering academic standards in universities due to their alleged consistent plagiarism or soft marking by lecturers. This image is often reinforced by sensationalised media stories about the educational integrity of these education institutes and / or international students. As international students bring about \$2bn a year to Australian universities (Smith 2003) this compounds the discussions around these issues.

The failure to consider cross cultural issues in learning has arguably led to the emergence of this stereotypical view about international students (Ramburuth and McCormick 2001; Leask 2001; Carroll 2004). However many researchers have questioned the stereotyping of international students (Ninnes, Aitchison & Kalos 1999; Leask 2004) and have acknowledged a need for investigation into their previous learning experience in their home country. In addition, it has been confirmed that the practices that characterise integrity and quality in teaching and learning vary according to the culture. For example a verbatim reproduction of what is being read and learnt in texts is unethical and viewed as a sub-standard piece of writing and unacceptable in one culture but is acceptable and sought after in another (Pennycook 1996; James, McInnes & Devlin 2002; Carroll 2004a).

Indian International Students

This research focuses specifically on Indian students for a number of reasons including Indian students comprising an increasingly substantial percentage of postgraduate students studying in Australia (DEST 2004) and that many postgraduate Indian students were being sent (at the time of our research) for a “remedial consultation” with a Learning Skills Advisor (as prescribed in the university academic misconduct policy) for committing plagiarism in their theses or other assignments. Additionally, one of the researchers, Handa, has studied and taught in the Indian higher education system and her insight and experience enhanced the depth and interpretation of the research. Being one of the “outer circle” countries of the English-speaking world (Kachru 1985 cited in Hamp-Lyons & Wengxia Zhang 2001), India has inherited English as its lingua franca. Therefore English is an additional language which most Indians need to learn especially for attaining higher education and most postgraduate students coming from India usually have a good command of English. Hence just language could not be attributed as a major causal factor in instances of plagiarism among Indian international students, the researchers determined to investigate other factors such as accusations of lack of academic integrity or lack of skills in the Australian academic context.

Methodology

Case Study

As this research falls essentially into the framework of a case study it is situated in the qualitative paradigm. Within this we would locate our methodology in the constructivist framework which recognises the existence of multiple realities and inherently acknowledges a subjective epistemology which is that “knower and respondent concrete understandings” (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p.21). The researchers’ purpose was to gain an understanding of the perspectives of Indian students in relation to plagiarism and thus give voice (Jones 2004) to their experience. Lincoln and Denzin query “how can we ever hope to speak authentically of the experience of the Other, or an Other?” (2000 p.1050). As mentioned, Handa has both studied and taught in the Indian higher education system and we would suggest that her experience in some part provides insights and access to interpretations of the “experience of the Other” that otherwise would not have occurred. This added dimension also enabled contact to be readily made with Indian institutions and provided insight into how to frame the questions to suit the target groups.

The process of qualitative research, although firmly established, still faces detractors, particularly regarding reliability and validity (Anfara, Brown & Angione 2002). In order to address the issue of validity, the process of triangulation which involves multiple methods of data collection is used as it adds “rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln 2000 p.5). In the context of a case study, as the elements are not able to be repeated perfectly, triangulation also serves to enable different perspectives towards the object of research (Stake 2000). Richardson (2000) suggests that the concept of crystallisation describes more accurately than the term triangulation the process of recognising the different perspectives inherent in any one situation, and not only the different perspectives but the multiple realities refracted, dependent on the positioning of the viewer. As we are not operating with a fixed object of research, but rather the exploration of understandings and practice in different contexts, we also prefer to utilise the imagery of crystallisation to describe the approach we have taken. As well as establishing a form of reliability, we sought to provide a forum in which different voices from the Indian context could express their conceptions of academic integrity and notions of plagiarism. Thus our intention was that a clearer image of their context would emerge (crystallise) for the reader. To gain as holistic a picture as possible, within the confines of a limited research undertaking, we selected three methods of data collection: questionnaires for undergraduate students currently studying in India, a small sample of questionnaires for lecturers currently teaching in Indian colleges and interviews with Indian postgraduate students who were studying in Australia at the time the research was conducted. This study had the approval of the UWS ethics committee.

Data Collection

Undergraduate Students in India

120 questionnaires focusing on students’ understandings of plagiarism, experiences of referencing and the notion of “cheating” were sent to lecturers in Colleges affiliated to an Indian University to distribute to their undergraduate students (see Appendix A). The questionnaires were designed to gauge students’ notions of referencing, plagiarism and academic integrity in their educational context. The questions comprised a mixture of closed and open ended questions, as well as a number of scenarios. The scenarios were; copying from another student in exams, copying from a book in exams, paraphrasing from a book when writing an assignment and using ideas/words from a book without acknowledging (in writing) their sources. Handa suggested the term ‘cheating’ in framing the questions, as more likely to elicit students’ interpretations of integrity than using the term ‘integrity’ itself. The responses from the closed questionnaires and scenarios were compiled in order to gain a percentage weight measure of each response. The open ended responses were grouped according to emerging themes.

Lecturers teaching in India

Questionnaires were also sent to 10 lecturers at the same Colleges who were teaching at an undergraduate level (Appendix B). These consisted of five open ended questions about their expectations in relation to referencing, teaching of referencing skills and penalties for failing to reference. Responses were grouped according to the questions and commonality or disparity of answers.

Postgraduate Indian International students

Interviews were conducted with postgraduate students who were currently studying in Australia, both to discuss in some depth their experiences of academic study in the Australian context and to investigate a correlation with the responses from students studying in India (Appendix C). Braine has suggested that what “is lacking in the research are the authentic voices of NNS (Non native speaking) graduate students” (2002, p.65) and interviews were chosen as a means of addressing this absence of voice. As a significant purpose and benefit of the interview technique is to enter the mind of another and to gain insight into their experience (Patton 2002), it was considered more appropriate to interview a reasonably small group of students than to distribute a questionnaire to a larger cohort. Interviews were semi structured with a standard set of questions used as the basis for discussion to enable a measure of comparison between the various interviews. However students were encouraged to extend their responses beyond the set questions to allow for the complexities of issues to be explored. Students were interviewed either in individual or small group (2 to 3 participants) format according to their availability or request. Both formats have advantages: group interviews allow the stimulation of recall through discussion and may encourage further exploration of issues, while an individual interview although often more contingent on the rapport established between interviewer and respondent may yield a reflective and in-depth perspective (Fontana & Frey 2000).

Potential participants were recruited from the Learning Skills Unit database or recommended by the university’s International Office and they were sent an explanatory letter inviting them to participate in the research. The questions attempted to elucidate the research aims by focussing initially on these students’ prior experiences in India in terms of assignments types, referencing and plagiarism and then discussing their current experiences in Australia, particularly in relation to assignment writing and academic conventions like referencing. Both researchers were responsible for conducting interviews, which were mostly audio taped and transcribed. Responses were grouped accorded to the questions and emerging themes were identified.

Findings

Undergraduate Students

Eighty students in the final year of their undergraduate degrees studying Arts, Psychology Honours or Commerce in Indian colleges completed the questionnaires. A typical profile of the students emerged as students who studied in English in an undergraduate college in India, who intended to study further in India (95%) and who did not use computers for writing assignments. Examinations dominated as the most common mode of assessment followed by class tests and sometimes written assignments. A clear majority (80%) of students indicated that they used the ideas or words of other writers in their writing and 85% responded that they reference / acknowledge the source of the ideas and words they have used. However, of these, 60% claimed to reference in text, 30% used a reference list and 12% claimed to use both techniques.

The answers indicate some confusion with the term 'in text referencing' nevertheless it is clear that students are aware of the need for acknowledgement of sources. When asked to explain their understanding of plagiarism the most frequent explanations could be grouped thematically as *copying or cheating from others work without due credit* or *it is illegal, stealing/ taking ideas of others as your own* or *using unfair means*. 20% of students left the question unanswered. One of the more elaborated replies explained that it:

depends on the assignment. If suppose I am writing a book of my own in using other writers ideas then it is cheating. If just for college assignments then it is not cheating. It is then just taking in for information for project work.

Another student commented that: it means not giving due acknowledgement to the real writer or author. It is a sort of cheating.

In order to address the issue of academic integrity and gain an understanding of what constituted 'cheating' in their academic context, students were presented with scenarios to identify as 'cheating', 'unsure' or 'not cheating'. Students were very clear that copying from another student (95%) or from a book in their exams (90%) was cheating. In terms of using material from a book when writing an assignment, 80% said it was not cheating, but in terms of acknowledging this material 55% said that not acknowledging where the words or ideas came from was cheating and a further 30 % were unsure. It can be seen that there is some contradiction between the definitions of plagiarism provided by students and the responses to the final two scenarios. This may have been due to confusion about the terminology of referencing used in the questionnaire or confusion about the practical application of 'plagiarism' in their context.

Lecturers

Feedback from the lecturers in India supported the findings from the students' questionnaires. Lecturers were asked a number of questions regarding their expectations of students in relation to referencing practices and there was unanimous agreement that referencing is not expected at undergraduate level and it is not until postgraduate level that referencing is mandatory. One lecturer commented that:

referencing is not expected at BA degree level. For masters they are expected to, but it is not necessary. Referencing is very important for M.Phil and Ph.D.

Another suggested that where students do not reference:

there are no penalties at BA degree; it is not until Masters or beyond.

It was also noted that explicit instruction is not necessary at undergraduate level because:

students are depending upon their text books

or because:

of the pattern of teaching as well as of examination [that] does not require or ask for such techniques.

Another lecturer commented that:

they are not expected to reference the sources they use; however credit is certainly given to the student who mentions the source.

There was general concurrence among the lecturers' responses to all 5 questions.

Postgraduate Students

The interviews were conducted with 15 postgraduate international students currently studying in Australia who had completed their undergraduate degrees in India and who came from a diversity of disciplines including education, public health and business, computing and engineering. The postgraduate students identified in the interviews that their prior experiences in India concurred with the undergraduate students surveyed, in that examinations had also been their most common mode of assessment. They also explained that referencing had not been expected of them at undergraduate level except as a reference list or bibliography at the end of a piece of written work. In a discussion about the definitions of plagiarism given in the students' questionnaires one of the postgraduate students claimed that students know the dictionary definition of plagiarism but that it was not a concept related to students' practical experience. Another discussion supported the results of the questionnaires relating to cheating:

Student: they know the meaning of plagiarism; in an exam we don't have a textbook, we write it ourselves and if one of my friends sees what I am writing and copies that is plagiarism.

Researcher: so plagiarism is copying from someone else?

Student: yes.

Researcher: but what about copying from a textbook?

Student: no.

Another postgraduate student expressed: in India we were supposed to write exactly as it was written in the books; if you write according to the book you will get more marks so we write according to the book.

Researcher: it's not called copying or cheating?

Student: no, because you have to remember what is written in the text book, you have to memorise and then go and do the exam.

At the time of interviewing some of the postgraduate students were in their second semester in Australia and felt they had come to terms with the expectations of the Australian academic system. The newer students acknowledged that they were still acculturating and acquiring necessary skills. A., who had been a lecturer in English literature in India, was quite confident that:

the standards of the courses in the good universities in India do emulate the standards of the same in Australia.

However both he and other postgraduate students noted that academic writing in Australia was different in various ways including the academic conventions expected; such as in-text referencing, the more critical and analytical nature of the writing and the use of technology in assignments. In terms of how writing is different in Australia to their previous institute, responses included:

it is more difficult

and:

in India the lecturers were interested more in the content of the assignment not on the presentation but here the emphasis is on both things.

When asked about their experiences with their assignments in Australia the same student commented that:

when I was doing my project in design management I did my work on more than 6 or 7 pages without any text references, I gave only a list of references – I lost 60% of my marks for that.

When queried as to whether anyone had explained to him about referencing practices he replied:

actually it's very hard for us to even think that we have to do that kind of thing because we never did it in India, all we are thinking is it's not a very important thing, but when we lose marks in our assignment we find out. We know about referencing in the last, but not in the text, in the paragraphs.

When asked to describe his prior understanding of paraphrasing, B. responded that to paraphrase is:

to simplify a text and explain it in your own words ... for this there does not need to be any referencing.

Students had learnt about referencing in the Australian academic context in a number of different ways. Some had gleaned the process through observing the use of referencing in texts they read, others had had discussions with lecturers or fellow students or some had acted upon feedback they received in their assignments and attended the Learning Skills Unit. Several students had failed their first assignments due to lack of referencing. The only explicit approach mentioned was where a student's first assignment had been to research the plagiarism policy of their university and then provide examples of what would be considered plagiarism. Although some students said they had received some introduction to academic skills in the Australian context there seemed to be general agreement that it was insufficient. They recognised that it may have been written about in a unit outline or as university policy, or in handouts they received however generally, they seemed to feel that the onus was on them to as one student phrased it, to:

land and discover

Students suggested that they were expected to adapt in a very short timeframe without adequate understanding of their situation.

When students come, in the first few weeks they should have some extra class to talk about referencing and all other things necessary for completing assignments. I would want them to know what we studied there [India] first of all, how the study mode is there and we are capable of doing all the things over here.

It takes time to adapt to new environmentsbut we have lack of time.....the first 2 – 4 weeks nobody understands what is going on, they understand what they are saying but they have so many doubts in their brain – that we are doing something wrong. In this matter E [lecturer] is very organised; he is not giving any marks before the 4th week.

Another aspect of studying in Australia that a number of the students commented on was the different expectations of lecturers and the confusion this created for the students;

Different lecturers have different expectations so it becomes difficult for the student to know how actually to present.

Overall the feedback was consistent between the interviews and in comparison with the questionnaires from students and lecturers in India. Students demonstrated that they had a contextual understanding of academic integrity. The concept of plagiarism however elicited a wide range of responses and was not aligned with the concept of academic integrity in undergraduate practical application in the Indian context. This was confirmed by the lecturers who stated that referencing is not expected at undergraduate level nor explicitly taught. In hindsight the questionnaire would have benefited from greater clarity of terminology in the questions relating to referencing and techniques.

More specific information could have been gained by prefacing the questionnaire with a glossary of terms, as the word referencing, in particular, seems to have broad applications. Handa suggests that our use of the term 'in text referencing' could have been inferred to be a reference list as it is generally part of the main text and not a separate document as such. As our focus had been to obtain an understanding of students' notions of academic integrity and plagiarism we had not realised the importance of clarifying their perceptions of referencing mechanics. Additionally, an omission in the set of questions for the postgraduate students was an explicit question about the students' notion of academic integrity and although it was discussed during the interviews it was not recorded so as to be directly comparable to the questionnaire results.

Discussion

The results from the questionnaires and interviews indicated that neither language skills nor lack of academic integrity were major factors in contributing to instances of plagiarism in the writing of Indian international students. In terms of academic integrity the undergraduate Indian students as well as the postgraduate Indian international students demonstrated an understanding of and respect for academic integrity in their academic context. Copying from another student in exams was clearly considered to be cheating however in their particular context students did not consider taking words or ideas from a book to be cheating. The responses to the questionnaires and the discussions with the postgraduate students also indicated that plagiarism in the Indian context is not comparable at undergraduate level to the Australian experience.

Academic Integrity

Academic Integrity is considered to be "a fundamental value of teaching, learning, and scholarship" (Centre for Academic Integrity 2002). However it is important to recognise that integrity, although a universal value may have different manifestations and forms according to different contexts (Kurtz 1973 cited in Norman 1995), in different countries and cultures. Particularly in the case of academic discourse, expected conventions of an academic community may produce a different set of principles regarding academic integrity. For example in an Indian context, lack of integrity (cheating) had nothing to do with referencing and acknowledging ideas and words from books and authors. Ideas and even words of well known writers and philosophers are considered as part of the collective bank of knowledge and learners are supposed to make use of these to learn and develop new knowledge.

Hence, at least at undergraduate level, academic dishonesty does not mean failure to reference. Interestingly in a recent report on academic dishonesty among medical students in an Indian context it was found to be clearly evident that at undergraduate level academic dishonesty mainly comprised of students copying from books or each other in exams and plagiarism was not even mentioned as an example of their academic dishonesty (Gitanjali 2004).

The concept of cheating therefore can be seen to be culturally specific and although plagiarism was identified by the undergraduate students as a form of stealing it was an abstract concept that had little relevance to the students' immediate experience. The postgraduate students confirmed however that once they were aware of the standards of academic integrity in the Australian context that they strove to meet them.

If then, language proficiency and academic integrity factors are diminished as reasons for plagiarism, the question about the major factors responsible for incidences of plagiarism remains. We suggest that the answer lies in both the complexity of the concept of plagiarism and the assumptions that underlie academics' expectations of international students.

Complexities of Plagiarism

Plagiarism seems to be just the tip of an iceberg which signals the complexities lying beneath this often very visible misconduct on the part of students, particularly those who are from a non English speaking background. Because addressing the issue of plagiarism is often simplified to providing a 'band aid' solution such as referencing instruction, the underlying differences in academic culture are often not fully appreciated or probed. Warner argues that plagiarism is "a text based practice that reflects different cultural and linguistic norms" (1999, p.25). The findings from the undergraduate students in India confirm that students taught to base their writing on books and other writers' texts to get a good mark may have a different concept of plagiarism (Cadman 1997). In contrast to western academic practices, where analysing and critiquing are achieved through the use of expert voice, in India and even in some other academic cultures such as China or even Italy (Pennycook 1996) taking ideas and words from different books and writers to build an answer seems to be an accepted academic practice. As one's culture, upbringing, prior ideas, means of communication and audiences are instrumental in building intellectual creativity (Martin 1994), in this context students' reading and borrowing chunks of text or ideas to form their writing is not considered plagiarism and therefore unethical but as informing their process of learning.

Incidence of plagiarism therefore if it occurs among postgraduate Indian students studying in Australian universities needs to be investigated and dealt with, in a culturally sensitive manner and not a catch and punish mentality (Carroll 2005). New postgraduate students coming from any cultural background would usually face some academic adjustment problems because of different experiences and expectations at undergraduate level (Valimaa 1998 cited in Chen, Absalom & Holbrook 2003) and international students are no exception. It is therefore important that they are given a chance to learn and develop skills suitable to postgraduate level. Hence academics using a 'prevention is better than cure' advocated by experts (Carroll 2002) should give time and support to new students through their transition. In many cases, particularly Asian students with a Confucian based heritage learning culture (Watkins & Biggs 1996) usually realising their language difficulties (Deumert et al. 2005) may ask for more assistance and guidance and sometimes may not be penalised for their inadvertent plagiarism because of their apparent language difficulties. Unfortunately plagiarism can be considered a serious academic misconduct in Indian postgraduates because of two misconceptions.

First of all as mentioned earlier English being the lingua franca of Indian higher education sector most Indian postgraduates have or are thought to have a good command of English and secondly already possessing a university degree like most other postgraduate students they are expected to be familiar with academic conventions such as referencing techniques (Guilfoyle 2004).

The misconception about their language skills is again twofold as academics as well as students themselves believe in their English language proficiency. Many Indian international students even at undergraduate level feel that they will not encounter any language problems at university. For example in a recent study of international students' experiences in Australian universities, none of the international Indian students had acknowledged language difficulty to be one of their major concerns (Deumert et al. 2005).

Academics also consider students from the Indian subcontinent to have better language skills as they usually have a good command of language and can speak and present well in classes. However it needs to be taken into account that even though many Indian postgraduate students have studied in English and do possess a graduate degree their experiences with academic writing and their understanding of conventions of academic culture are quite different. Although sharing a common heritage of British higher education, diverging cultural forces have shaped differently the Indian and Australian higher education systems. This past commonality has undoubtedly lead to some assumptions of familiarity with western academic discourse by both Indian and Australian academics, as well as students themselves which has resulted in a lack of applied knowledge of the academic cultural diversity and the use of surface approaches to address a superficially recognised situation.

The disparity in approach between Indian undergraduate and Australian undergraduate education was encapsulated by one of the postgraduate students who explained that:

you can say in India they are the followers and here are the inventors. There they say if you can't follow you can't invent. Here they say you don't have a need to follow, you can invent. In India you can invent at master's level.

Although there are certainly cultural variations, Asian students' style of learning which is sometimes characterised by repetitive learning, internalising deep meaning actually reflects study diligence (Cortazzi & Jin 1997; Chan & Drover 1997; Ward, 2001). In these cultures, knowledge may be acquired and developed strictly according to the three stages of Masemann's developmental process of 'rote' to 'structural' to 'open'(1986 cited in Pennycook 1994). Therefore a different staging of expert voice occurs in the Indian academic context which means that Indian postgraduate students as they come from an exam oriented and teacher centred education system have developed different academic skills to those that Australian undergraduate students have been acquiring over a three or four year period, and to master the academic conventions of the western world they need time and support (Burns, 1991; Leask 1999; Ryan 2000; McInnis, 2001; Schevyns et al. 2003; Chanock 2003; Handa 2003). With recent legislation requiring international students to pass their subjects within a limited time or forfeit their student visas (DIMIA 2003) international students have less time in which to learn about the conventions of scholarship in the Australian system (Chanock 2003). In the words of a student:

There is no time either, we get our visa, we have to come and as soon as we come we have to submit our assignments. And no one says how to submit our assignments, how to use WebCteverything is difficult.

Acknowledgement of diverse cultural backgrounds and opportunities for meaningful academic acculturation should be essential aspects of the experience of an international student studying in Australia (Warner 1999; Ryan 2000; Volet 2003; Leask 2004; Carroll 2004) and responsibilities for creating a better cultural understanding should be shared by both teachers and students (Wu 2002). Where international students need to learn western academic conventions, lecturers teaching international students also need to embrace the true spirit of internationalisation by incorporating recognition of the prior cultural context of their students and instead of assuming homogeneity, should teach to the heterogeneity of their students' experience.

Broader Context

Although our research has focussed on a particular cohort of students, we suggest that our findings have some transferability to the current debate on plagiarism. We would argue that in some ways Indian postgraduate students share the same experience as any new student attending university for the first time, as most new students face adjustment issues

(Kantanis 2000; McInnis 2001; Pitkethly & Prosser 2001). In this case, Leask's metaphor of learning the new rules of the game is particularly apt. The increasingly diverse student cohort, both undergraduate and postgraduate, arrive at university from a vast range of contexts. To build upon the metaphor of 'the rules of the game'; it is a recognised Australian ethos that games are played fairly. At many levels of sport for example, there are measures such as tribunals put in place to ensure that rules are adhered to. This is comparable to the situation at universities where various panels of academics address plagiarism as a breach of the rules. However, generally, in the sporting context players are not sent out onto the field until they are clearly taught the rules of the games and have been sufficiently trained that the coach feels they have adequate skills to participate. Where continuing loss occurs, particularly at higher level the coach is ultimately held responsible. In recognising that students arrived unskilled and unpractised in the rules of academic conventions, this metaphor can convey to staff "that it is not students who are the issue or the problem; rather it is the fact that the rules have changed and 'in many respects we [staff] determine the rules of the game' (Introna et al. 2003, p. 51 cited in Leask in press).

However according to Carroll (2003), it is not only the students but teachers too who must 'discover for themselves the local and relevant aspects of avoiding plagiarism that will usefully inform their academic practice' (p.13) as this would help their students tremendously. Unfortunately, far too often academics do not take adequate responsibility for properly inducting their students into the new culture and many students end up plagiarising because they do not fully understand the academic requirements of their new academic culture (JISC guidance cited in Carroll 2003). Although a culture of shared responsibility seems to be emerging, aligned with a reassessment of approaches taken towards plagiarism, many academics blame their students when they do not understand thinking that it is for the students to discover "what is plagiarism and what is not" (Biggs 1999, p. 130) and do not want to dwell on their own inability to explain and define plagiarism (Leask 2004) which just shifts the responsibility that needs to be shared.

Recommendations & Conclusion

This research adds to the substantial body of recent literature (Carroll 2004a & b; Leask 2004; Fagan, Hoysted & Smith 2004) that recognises the need for the teaching of explicit academic skills to international students which would incorporate academic acculturation including an exploration of the rationale underlying Australian academic practices. On shore and off shore preparatory courses are very important to give Asian students a head start in this direction. It is also important that off shore preparatory programs are put in place by western universities seeking students from Asian countries and which can be the responsibility of their staff members involved in recruitment of students for international study. Educators and administrators in these countries (Major 2005) should also prepare students for further and higher education in western countries.

Such teaching needs to be workshop based rather than didactic so that students actively participate in their learning. It is also essential to develop critical reading and note-taking skills as well as summarising and paraphrasing skills so that students are able to incorporate evidence appropriately into their writing. These skills which are developmental and often best learnt within the students' specific academic discourse using a scaffolded approach (Weiland & Nowak 1999; Chanock 2003; Major 2005), should be taught and practised once students arrive and start university in Australia. Due to the academic support and advisory role taken by Learning Skills lecturers, their expertise into the academic needs of university students and insight gained from their involvement with students would be valuable in assisting academics and international students with their teaching and learning issues (Harris & Bretag 2002). An interaction between faculties, students and Learning Skills staff is crucial for addressing international students' needs.

Hence the onus of responsibility lies with all stakeholders, but as the service providers, universities must accept their responsibilities for providing students with the best possible conditions for success. It is time to address the paradox of punishment that international student in particular confront when they commence studying in Australian universities. It is important for Australian universities to recognise their ethical responsibility to provide their fee paying clientele with explicit and in depth instruction (Srikanthan & Dalrymple 2002) and to stop punishing or blaming international students for their perceived ethical deficit.

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